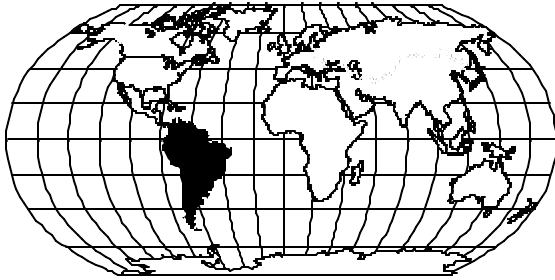


LESSON 3: SOUTH AMERICA — THROUGH THE TROPICS TOWARD ANTARCTICA



INTRODUCTION

South America (Illustration 5.3.1) is the fourth largest continent, extending about 5000 miles from north to south. It reaches farther south than any other continent except Antarctica, with its southern tip at Cape Horn only 620 miles from that frozen continent.

A principal physical feature of South America is the Andes Mountain System, which extends almost 5,000 miles from Venezuela in the north to Tierra Del Fuego (an archipelago divided between Chile and Argentina) in the south. The system widens in Bolivia and Peru, forming an altiplano, a high plateau between high mountain ranges. Like the North American Cordillera, the Andes follow the Pacific coast. They are rich in minerals, contain active volcanoes, and experience earthquakes.

Another principal physical feature of South America is the Amazon River, the second longest river in the world after the Nile. It flows almost 4,000 miles across the country from Peru through Brazil to the Atlantic Ocean. The Amazon drains almost half of the continent, carries more water than any other river in the world, and travels through the world's largest rain forest. There are no obstructions along the course of the river, and ocean-going vessels travel almost its full length. Other important rivers include the Orinoco River in the north and the Paraná River in the south.

Important grasslands in South America include the Pampas in Argentina and Uruguay, a 300,000 square-mile plain that supports livestock and agriculture; the Gran Chaco in Argentina and Paraguay, a lowland that supports livestock; and the Llanos, a savanna-like area in the Orinoco River basin in Colombia and Venezuela that has oil reserves and great agricultural potential yet to be tapped.

Also of note are the Atacama Desert in northern Chile, a coastal, desert plateau with great mineral wealth that is considered one of the driest places on Earth; Patagonia in the south, a semi-arid plateau rising from the Atlantic coast to the base of the Andes, also with great mineral wealth; the Galapagos Islands belonging to Ecuador that are famous for their unique geology, plants, and animals, including the giant tortoise; and the British-owned Falkland Islands which Argentina claims is theirs and tried unsuccessfully to take over in 1982.

IMPORTANT HISTORICAL/POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Like North America before the arrival of the Europeans, Indians were the original inhabitants of South America, with the Incas creating the greatest South American Indian empire along the west coast. After conquering Middle America, the Spanish turned to conquering and colonizing South America, taking control of western and southern South America and forcing the Indian population into labor. In the meantime, the Portuguese claimed the east coast of South America and much of the South American interior. This area became Brazil. Because there were few native Indians living east of the Andes to use as labor, the Portuguese brought Africans to the continent to work on plantations.



Illustration 5.3.1

The remaining South American territories along the northeast coast (now Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana) became British, Dutch, and French colonies, respectively. Africans, East Indians, and Indonesians (an island in southeast Asia) were brought or immigrated to this area to work on sugar plantations.

With the exception of French Guiana, which is an overseas department of France, the other South American countries gained their independence in the early 1800s. Since then, they have fought each other over territory and experienced political instability marked by military rule, oppressive dictatorships, and civil war — making it difficult for many of these countries to maintain democratic governments.

PEOPLE

Unlike North American, South America never drew a large European immigrant population, and its current population of about 302 million people is small for a continent of its size. More people live along the northwest, west, and east coasts of the continent, with few people living in the south, northeast, or interior. About half of the population lives in Brazil. Most of South America is still considered underdeveloped and standards of living are low. Many people move to the cities in hopes of finding work and a better life, so three out of four South Americans currently live in urban areas. Like other underdeveloped countries, however, many unskilled workers end up living in poverty in the crowded, rundown areas surrounding these cities.

A majority of South Americans are of European and/or Indian ancestry. The main European influences are Spanish and Portuguese, with most people speaking one of those two languages. In certain countries, however, many people also speak Native Indian languages. The majority of South Americans are Catholic.

REGIONS

ON THE CARIBBEAN: COLOMBIA, THE GUIANAS, AND VENEZUELA

Colombia, the Guianas, and Venezuela have their northern, Caribbean coastal location in common. All of them at one time had plantation economies, and today each country still has a tropical plantation area. Because of their plantation history, the countries' population mix, in addition to Spanish and South American Indian, includes people of African, East Indian, and Indonesian descent.

Colombia is the only South American country with both Pacific and Caribbean coastlines. The Pacific coast is swampy and humid, while the Caribbean side is dry and hot. Colombians grow sugar, tobacco, and coffee. Oil and coal are its other leading exports.

Unlike the majority of South America, the Guianas have British, French, and Dutch heritage. Because of this, English, French, and Dutch are official languages. Exports from this area include sugar, fish, lumber, rum, coffee, and bauxite, a principal source of aluminum.

Venezuela also exports coffee, and it is a leading oil producer of oil. One of the world's greatest oilfields is in Lake Maracaibo which is really a gulf open to the Caribbean Sea. Unfortunately, the lake now has major pollution problems due to oil spills. Venezuela is one of South America's wealthier countries because of its oil production. Like Mexico, however, it borrowed against its future oil profits and faces problems paying off its large foreign debt.

THE INDIAN REGION: BOLIVIA, ECUADOR, PARAGUAY, AND PERU

In west and central South America, the countries of Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Peru have large Indian populations, almost 90 percent being Indian or mestizo. These Indian populations have very low incomes, and the region is the least urbanized in South America.

In the altiplano in Bolivia, freshwater Lake Titicaca, the highest large lake in the world, creates milder weather at its elevation of 12,500 feet and makes agriculture possible. Bolivians have grown grains in the area for centuries. They also export mineral oil, gas, zinc, silver, copper, and tin. Bolivia, however, is at a disadvantage economically because it is landlocked with no seaports of its own.

Ecuador is one of the leading exporters of bananas and is South America's second largest exporter of crude oil. Although it is not a poor country, the Indian population in the interior lives in poverty.

Paraguay is the only non-Andean country in this region. It is also the poorest. Its most important commercial activity is cattle grazing in the Gran Chaco. Like Bolivia, Paraguay is landlocked and must transport its exports of meat, timber, cotton, and tobacco on the Paraná River to Argentina's Buenos Aires. Possible oil reserves in the Gran Chaco could provide future income for both Paraguay and Argentina.

Peru's economic activities include a large fishing industry on the coast, and agriculture where mountain streams irrigate valleys in the coastal desert. These areas produce cotton and sugar for export, and rice, wheat, fruit, and vegetables for the country's consumption. Northeastern Peru has oil, and its rain forests supply nuts, rubber, herbs, and wood. The

country also exports copper, zinc, silver, and lead.

The Andes are home to half of Peru's population, but the many Indians living there have little political or economic influence. Most work on their own small farms or are laborers on larger farms.

THE SOUTH: ARGENTINA, CHILE, AND URUGUAY

In southern South America, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay have large European populations. Spanish is the official language, and the area is better developed economically than others on the continent.

Argentina's wealth comes from the Pampas that produce abundant livestock and grains. Transportation of the Pampas' products to Argentina's cities is on the densest railroad system in South America, which radiates from Argentina's capital, Buenos Aires. In the cities, manufacturing to process the Pampas' products is a major economic activity. In addition, Argentina has an oilfield in Patagonia, where sheep are also raised. In the future, there is also the possibility of oil drilling in the Gran Chaco.

Uruguay is also a prosperous, agricultural country because of the Pampas. Surrounding Montevideo, its capital, is the major agricultural area, producing vegetables, fruit, and wheat for the country's internal consumption. Raising sheep and cattle is the main economic activity in the rest of the country, and Uruguay's chief exports are wool, hides, and meat. Like Buenos Aires, railroads radiate from Montevideo into Uruguay's interior aiding in the transport of agricultural products.

Chile has the world's largest reserves of copper. Found mainly in the Atacama Desert, it has become Chile's major export. Most of Chile's population lives in middle Chile, where

agriculture is the chief economic activity. The area also supports cattle. In southern Chile, the coast breaks up into many islands, and few people live there.

BRAZIL: ON THE RISE

As the largest country on the continent, Brazil makes up its own region within South America. It is almost the size of all other South American nations combined. It is the fifth largest country in the world and the sixth largest in population. Interestingly, it is the only country in the world that intersects both the Equator and a tropic. The Amazon River basin takes up almost 60 percent of the country, gets heavy rainfall, and is covered in tropical forest. The Brazilian Highlands cover much of the rest of Brazil, with steep cliffs and slopes dropping to sea level along the coastline and leaving little coastal living space.

Brazil's heritage gives it a strong national culture, with one dominating language, Portuguese, and one main religion, Catholicism. Because of the millions of African slaves brought to work on Brazil's sugar plantations, Brazil has South America's largest black population. About 12 percent of Brazilians are black, 30 percent are of mixed African, white, and Indian ancestry, and more than half are of European descent. Indians make up a very small minority.

Brazil's economy is on the rise in the world because of its abundant natural resources, rapid urbanization, growing industry, enormous mineral deposits, and major oil and gas fields. It has built huge hydroelectric plants, including the world's largest dam, the Itaipu, which is 600 feet high and five miles long.

In agriculture, Brazil is a leading producer and exporter of coffee, soybeans, and oranges.
